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Painful Thought

Sen. J. William Fulbright has asked his colleagues, the Government and his fellow citizens to contemplate the changes that have taken place in the world since our foreign policies were framed and to re-examine them to see if we ought to change some of them. Those who think this a modest and reasonable proposal greatly underestimate the unwillingness of people to think, about foreign policy or anything else.

The Senator got immediate, and no doubt unexpected support for his argument that our position has become unnecessarily rigid and inflexible. Senator Miller of Iowa and Senator Smathers of Florida demonstrated at once just how inflexible our attitude is. The mindless retort of the Florida Senator, criticizing the speech because "it would please the Communists, revealed very clearly how we have made the contemplation of alternative policies "unthinkable."

Senator Fulbright's central proposition—that there has been a "radical change in the relations between and within the Communist and the free world" is indisputable. It is a fact of history. It seems only reasonable to argue that policies that were adopted before this history unfolded should be re-examined in the light of this unforeseen development.

The Senator, throughout his speech, really argued that we ought to accommodate our policies to new situations. He did not endorse the situations or applaud them; he just cited their existence as a fact of life. Some of these facts are unpleasant: the fact that our allies will trade with the Communist bloc; the fact that we are unwilling to invade Cuba and unable to blockade it; the fact that our suspension of military assistance is in many cases a "stuffed club"; the fact that revolutions may occur in South America in spite of our wishes; the fact that China is ruled by Communists and is likely to remain so for the indefinite future; the fact that we cannot hope to end the war in South Viet-Nam by negotiation until we change the equation of advantages.

These are all circumstances that to varying degrees it is uncomfortable to contemplate. In

the next few days Senator Fulbright is sure to be blamed for inventing them instead of just criticized for calling them to public attention. But he did not summon them into being and he cannot send them away, and neither can his critics.

There is plenty of room for difference over just what should be done in each of these disagreeable situations. There can be no intelligent argument that they do not exist. The country is indebted to Senator Fulbright for his efforts to get us to think about them. All of these situations have changed and are changing. It is of the first importance that in a time of such extraordinary fluidity we keep our foreign policies under a continuous re-examination. That is what the Senator is asking the country to do; and as some of the responses to his address indicate, it is asking a lot.

... and Timely Counsel

The passages of Senator Fulbright's speech dealing with Panama broke a long and unwholesome silence in Congress on our dispute with this small republic. It is about time that a legislator with Mr. Fulbright's prestige recalled that the 1903 treaty authorizing the Panama Canal was not precisely as unblemished as the Ark of the Covenant. And it is high time that someone as prominent as the Senator reminded the country that our dispute with Panama was not a re-enactment of the Cuban missile crisis. He said:

I am unable to understand how a controversy with a small and poor country, with virtually no military capacity, can possibly be regarded as a test of our bravery and will to defend our interests. It takes stubbornness but not courage to resist the entreaties of the weak. The real test in Panama is not of our valor but of our wisdom and judgment and common sense.

All who have been distressed by this prolonged quarrel will add a grateful amen. Surely the Administration should welcome Mr. Fulbright's encouragement of a conciliatory approach to Panama. He speaks as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, which would have to approve any revisions in the 1903 treaty. His words are indication of the support the President can expect if he takes the leadership in turning a lamentable dispute into a victory for magnanimity and common sense.